

ABOUT THE
HOLOCAUST
...WHAT WE KNOW
AND HOW WE KNOW IT

by Dorothy Rabinowitz

Foreword by Telford Taylor

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Foreword

Most of the victims of what has become known as “the Holocaust” were Jews, but the story of the Holocaust is not a Jewish story. Nor is it a German story, though most of the killers were German. The import of the Holocaust transcends all lines of race or religion; its human significance is universal.

It is fitting, therefore, that this pamphlet should appear at a time when a Presidential commission has been charged with the task of conceiving the form and substance of a national memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. That is not a simple undertaking. A memorial is a symbol, and to devise a fitting symbol is impossible without a clear understanding of what is being symbolized. Is the theme nothing more than a threnody — a monument to the sadness of untimely death? If these millions had perished in a natural disaster—a flood or earthquake—would the same memorial serve equally well for them and for the victims of the Holocaust?

Plainly not; much more is at stake here than the expression of grief for the dead. They were killed by human hands, and the sole reason for their selection was that they were Jews. It is not so much the fact of their deaths as it is the means and motive for their killing that gives the Holocaust its terrible moral significance, which the word “genocide” is intended to encapsulate.

Although the history of mankind is marked and marred by many mass atrocities, the Holocaust is unique in its scale, the deliberation with which it was executed, and the terrible modernity of the gas chambers and crematoria which were its principal means. It is fitting, therefore, that it should be memorialized separately.

But the years of the Holocaust were not the first in which humans have been killed in large numbers because of race or religion, and in modern times the American Indians and Armenians come readily to mind. Awareness of these exterminations darkens the horror of the Holocaust, because they show that the Nazi terror was not an unprecedented and solitary aberration, but a human phenomenon which had appeared before and, therefore, might occur again.

That is why, as Ms. Rabinowitz rightly reminds us, study of the Holocaust is more than the pursuit of history for its own sake. We may never fully understand why the Holocaust took place, but we cannot afford not to seek its comprehension. A first and long step is to know what happened, and that is what this pamphlet tells us.

June, 1979

TELFORD TAYLOR

DOROTHY RABINOWITZ is the author of *New Lives*, a widely acclaimed book based on the personal stories of more than 100 survivors of the Nazi death camps. She has also contributed many articles and reviews to *Commentary*, *New York* magazine and *Saturday Review*, and is co-author, with Yedida Nielson, of *Home Life*, a book dealing with old people in nursing homes and other institutions.

TELFORD TAYLOR represented the U.S. at the Nuremberg war crimes trials (1946-49) as chief counsel for the prosecution, with the rank of Brigadier General. He has since followed a dual career as a writer and lawyer. Besides practicing law, he has taught at Yale and Harvard, and currently teaches at Columbia and Benjamin N. Cardozo Law Schools.

I visited every nook and cranny of the camp because I felt it my duty to be in a position from then on to testify at first hand about these things in case there ever grew up at home the belief or assumption that "the stories of Nazi brutality were just propaganda."

General Dwight D. Eisenhower
recalling the camp at Ohrdruf, 1945

A philosopher has written that language breaks down when one tries to speak about the Holocaust. Our words pale before the frightening spectacle of human evil unleashed upon the world, and before the awesomeness of the suffering involved, the sheer weight of its numbers—eleven million innocent victims exterminated—six million of them Jews.

But, we must strive to understand, we must teach the lessons of the Holocaust, and most of all we ourselves must remember.

President Jimmy Carter
International Holocaust Day
Washington, April 24, 1979

Why do we cast back our minds to all this today?

*Not in order to dissociate ourselves
from our own history and not in order to point
our finger at others who had become guilty
... We commemorate in order to learn
how people ought to behave towards each other
and how they ought not to behave.*

—West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt,

Kristallnacht Anniversary

Cologne, November 9, 1978

About the Holocaust

On April 12, 1945, as the European phase of the Second World War drew to a close, the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, visited one of the Nazi camps that were being liberated by the armies of the United States and its allies. The camp—Ohrdruf Nord, just outside Gotha in east central Germany—was not a large-scale death factory; it was an ordinary Nazi concentration camp holding, at the time, some 3,000 buried and unburied dead. But the General saw enough to realize that future generations might not believe such things could have happened.

“I have never been able to describe my emotional reactions when I first came face to face with indisputable evidence of Nazi brutality and ruthless disregard of every shred of decency,” Eisenhower later wrote. “I am certain, however, that I have never at any other time experienced an equal sense of shock.” Some of the officers with him could not go through the whole camp, he noted, but he forced himself to look at everything, so that he could personally refute anyone who might some day dismiss the reports of Nazi atrocities as fabrications. And to make doubly sure the evidence was reliably recorded and publicized, Eisenhower asked the U.S. and British governments to send journalists and legislators to view the camps.¹

A generation later, the mind still recoils from the full horror of the Nazi crimes. And hardest to believe, even today, is the fact that *some six million men, women and children were systematically put to death simply because they were Jews.*

Yet there is no doubt that these things happened. The death tolls have been documented to within a few hundred thousand: approximately 815,000 Jews from Central Europe, 236,000 from the West European countries, 229,000 from Scandinavia and the Baltic countries, 402,000 from Southern and Southeastern Europe, and 4,252,000 from Poland and the Soviet Union—all together something over 5.9 million. (Figures for individual countries appear on page 38.)

The evidence was systematically set down by both the perpetrators and the victims, and there is no disagreement among them, either as to the intent or as to the result. The six-million total was first mentioned, not by an Allied or a Jewish source, but by Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi leader whose assignment it was to round up the Jews and deliver them for annihilation.² The testimony of the two sides agrees right down to names, places, dates and numbers. On the basis of this first-hand evidence, thousands of books and articles have been written, forming a vastly detailed record of what is known about the Holocaust.

Even to those well acquainted with what happened, the fact that an entire people's right to exist could be nullified by the official decree of one of the world's most advanced countries is still unassimilable. It is unassimilable, too, that this nullification could be endorsed and acted upon by citizens in the name of that country, and that the killing could be pursued with all the intelligence and the managerial and technological skills that a modern state could bring to the task. It remains beyond comprehension that, in accordance with the schedule, Jewish men, women and children from every corner of Europe were packed into cattle trains and transported to specially constructed camps in various regions of Poland, where they were herded into stalls and gassed to death. And it is still impossible to imagine that trainloads of such cargo arrived at the death camps daily, or every few days, for a period of years.

Jews were not the only group that suffered mass murder under the Nazis. During the early Hitler years, in a rehearsal for later extermination programs, there were mass killings of mental patients in Germany. In the same period, a great many political opponents of the Nazi regime were murdered in prisons and

concentration camps. During the war, large numbers of non-Jewish Poles, Russians and other Slavs, considered by the Nazis to be "of inferior race," died in prisoner-of-war camps, and countless civilians from the Nazi-occupied countries were literally worked to death in German war industries.

Only the Jews, however—and, according to some accounts, the gypsies—were slated for genocide, that is, deliberate and total extinction; and only they were killed, for the most part, not by overwork, unchecked disease, avoidable starvation or casual murder, but by the planned factory methods of the death camps.

If we are still unable to assimilate the full horror of those events, it is not because there is any question that they really happened, but for reasons within ourselves. In the span of recorded time the Holocaust is recent history; and our ability to absorb and understand such a catastrophe remains in question to this day. When the truth about what was taking place began to seep through during the war, and when it was laid bare for all to see after the fighting ended, there was a brief period when the magnitude of the Nazi crimes penetrated the consciousness of people everywhere. But after the Nuremberg trials of major and second-echelon war criminals ended, in 1949, the subject was widely avoided.

In the early 1960s, the Eichmann trial in Israel once more seared the conscience of a reluctant world for a brief period. But not until recent years have large numbers of concerned men and women the world over—civic and religious leaders, educators, and the public at large—finally come to view the Holocaust as history whose dimensions we cannot afford *not* to know.

They take this view because more than half of all who are now alive were born after the end of World War II, and because many of the new generation have little or no information about that entire era. Even fewer have the close personal knowledge of the Holocaust that is the inheritance of Jewish families, almost all of whom lost relatives in the catastrophe. Today, there is a new readiness to look into that dark period in human history and to try to understand what happened. The two questions people now ask themselves and the historians are: What do we really know? And how do we know it?

The sight we saw when we opened the cell doors was about like that of an overfilled suitcase being opened. The corpses fell out toward us. I estimate that up to 60 bodies were crammed into one small cell, so tightly that even in death they could not fall down but remained standing. We could see that they had crowded toward the air vent; actually the poison gas had been pumped in through this vent.

*—Report on the first gassings at Auschwitz,
by a Polish camp inmate.³*

What We Know

The Holocaust had its beginning in the rise of the National Socialists (Nazis) in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s. It was an era of inflation and depression, a time of bitter recrimination over the country's defeat in the First World War, and of social and economic upheaval. Immediately upon coming to power in 1933, the Hitler Government began, quite openly, to frame a national policy based on the Nazis' racial doctrines, in which the "subhuman" Jew was represented as the enemy incarnate of the German people and the "Aryan master race." By means of draconian anti-Semitic legislation, Jews were successively deprived of civil-service careers, public education, citizenship rights, property, opportunities to earn their livelihood and, eventually, freedom of movement. Toward the end of the 1930s, a vise of terror and violence closed ever tighter around the Jews of Germany, and of Austria after Hitler's annexation of that country.

With the outbreak of war in 1939 and the gradual Nazi conquest of most of the continent, the reign of terror was extended to country after country; nearly 9 million of Europe's Jews eventually came under German rule. In all of Europe, from Poland to France and from Norway to Greece, impoverishment, brutaliza-

tion and the daily peril of arrest and deportation became their lot. Expelled from economic life, forced to wear a yellow star, driven into ghettos, they were, as the Germans intended, practically and symbolically isolated from the non-Jewish population—an isolation foreshadowing the fate reserved for them. For Hitler and his henchmen had come to a decision: The Jews would all be killed; and to avoid arousing opposition within the Nazi empire or strengthening the Allies' determination to defeat Germany, that genocidal intent would be kept secret.

When Germany attacked the U.S.S.R. in June 1941, mobile killing units known as *Einsatzgruppen* ("commandos" or "action groups") closely followed the invading armies into the Soviet Union itself, as well as into Soviet-annexed Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and immediately killed a large part of the Jewish population, either by shooting or by packing them into vans and gassing them. At the same time, construction of large-scale extermination camps was begun, with chambers for mass gassings and ovens for burning the bodies. The first of these camps, at Chelmno, began functioning in December 1941; and within a few more months, six major camps were completed in Poland, five of which had no other function than the annihilation of Jews shipped from every corner of Europe.

The Germans had two reasons for selecting the East as the site of their mass murder installations. One was that the largest number of Jews lived in Eastern Europe; the other was that the non-Jews of the region had deep-rooted traditions of religious and political anti-Semitism and were unlikely to protest. The ranks of the Nazi killers were in fact swollen with accomplices from the non-Jewish native population.

Of the total 6 million Jewish dead, Nazi mobile killing units accounted for more than 2 million. Most of the others were gassed in the death camps. Of the nearly 9 million Jews who had come under Hitler's power, fewer than 3 million were alive at war's end.

I cannot recollect a single occasion when it was alleged by the Defence that any of the documents was forged or false.

—Lord Elwyn-Jones,
United Kingdom Prosecutor at Nuremberg⁴

How We Know

The Nazis' early persecution of the German and Austrian Jews, between 1933 and 1939, was conducted openly and was fully reported in German and foreign newspapers and other writings of that period. In addition to those accounts, there are published texts of Nazi laws and decrees; legal, business and government records; books, leaflets, and films disseminated by the Nazis themselves; and contemporary testimony or later recollections of individuals.

About the subsequent era of mass murder, which originally was intended to remain a secret, the largest body of evidence comes from the Germans themselves. A huge quantity of captured German documents provides incontrovertible proof that the "Final Solution"—the destruction of the Jews—was a primary goal of the Nazi war machine. Seized before the Nazis were able to destroy them, these records, detailing every step toward that goal, including the planning and execution of numerous mass murder operations, all came under the scrutiny of Allied intelligence teams whose task it was to assemble evidence of German war crimes; and so overwhelming was this evidence that in the trial of the major war criminals which followed, no defense lawyer ever claimed that even a single document was false or invalid.

The victims, too, provided evidence in the form of documents: personal papers, records buried underground and eyewitness reports. The Jewish testimony is small in volume compared to the official German records compiled over Hitler's 12-year reign; but it is indisputable.

One major source of the victims' evidence is the "Oneg Shabbat" ("Pleasures of the Sabbath") archives, a secret project directed during the years of the German occupation of Poland by a

Warsaw historian, Emanuel Ringelblum, whose aim was to record every aspect of Jewish life and its destruction at Nazi hands. Participants in the project risked their lives to collect data about ghetto life, institutions and culture, jokes, songs and curses, and to bury them underground. Included in the records were detailed accounts of German atrocities and of concentration camp experiences, secret correspondence reporting the fate of Jewish communities throughout Poland, copies of the underground press in the Warsaw ghetto, and diaries of their day-to-day existence which Ringelblum and his colleagues urged all Jews to keep.⁵

It was a deliberate effort by the victims to preserve for history the details of their final days and their destruction. The passion of their enterprise is given voice by one *Oneg Shabbat* participant whose testimony was among the records recovered from their underground hiding place after the war. David Grober, a young man whose assignment it was to pack and hide the documents, knew he was risking his life in the task; but he never doubted it was worth doing. "I don't want any thanks," he wrote. "It will be enough for me if the coming generations will recall our times . . . We reckoned that we were creating a chapter of history and that was more important than several lives . . . What we could not cry out to the world, we buried in the ground. May this treasure be delivered into good hands, may it live to see better times, so that it can alert the world to what happened in the twentieth century."⁶

Similar records were recovered after the war from the grounds of the Auschwitz extermination camp. The recorders there were a special detail of inmates whose task it was to remove bodies from the gas chambers and burn them. Doomed, as they knew, to the same fate as their fellow Jews, some of the members of this *Sonderkommando* (Special Squad) undertook to conceal eyewitness accounts and other evidence beneath the soil of the crematoria. Reflecting the passion of these chroniclers to record what was taking place, one such document, by a man named Salmen Gradowski, pleads: "Dear finder, search everywhere in every inch of ground. Dozens of documents are buried beneath it, mine and those of other persons, which will throw light on everything that happened here. Great quantities of teeth also are buried here. It was we, the commando workers, who deliberately strewed them all over the ground, as many as we could, so that the world should find material traces of the millions of murdered people . . ."⁷

Mutually confirming, the evidence set down by victims and perpetrators is validated by yet a third, small but significant body of information: the testimony of a handful of non-Jews who took the risk of recording, in protest, acts of genocide they had witnessed or had been forced to take part in. Best known among these is Kurt Gerstein, an SS officer who, in 1942, was ordered to find ways to improve the killing techniques in the death camps. Gerstein went to one of the camps, Belzec, to see at first hand what his assignment meant. Deeply shaken, he found ways to inform the Allies of what he had seen; eventually his report was published.⁸

The evidence concerning the Nazi crimes—most of it from official German records captured by the U.S. Army and the other liberating armies—was first revealed in its full scope at the Nuremberg trials, which were conducted between 1945 and 1949 by the United States in conjunction with her wartime allies. German government and army records, correspondence, photographs—a mountain of documents, composed in the spirit and the language of bureaucracy—were transformed by the Allied legal staff into eloquent briefs for the prosecution.

The trial of the Major German War Criminals before an International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg opened November 20, 1945, and ended October 1, 1946, before a panel of judges representing each of the Allied powers. The president of the court was Lord Justice Geoffrey Lawrence of Great Britain. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson was chief counsel for the United States prosecution; Sir Hartley Shawcross, His Majesty's Attorney General, appeared as chief prosecutor for Great Britain; Lieutenant General Roman A. Rudenko was the chief prosecutor for the Soviet Union, and France was represented by two chief prosecutors, François de Menthon and Auguste Champetier de Ribes.

The defendants—all in the top echelons of Nazi military or political leadership—stood accused of having committed Crimes Against Peace by planning, initiating or waging a war of aggression; of having committed War Crimes, including murder and deportation of civilian populations; and of having committed Crimes Against Humanity, specifically, murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation and other inhuman acts against civilian populations, as well as persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds.

The prisoners in the dock included former Reich Marshal Hermann Göring, Hitler's chief deputy since the 1930s; Joachim

von Ribbentrop, Foreign Minister of the Reich; Hans Frank, Governor-General of Poland, which is to say the chief administrator of occupied Poland; Julius Streicher, since 1923 editor of *Der Stürmer*, Germany's chief organ of anti-Semitic propaganda; Albert Speer, architect and head of German war production, for which enterprise millions of slave laborers were brought to Germany; and Fritz Sauckel, the administrator who provided Speer with his slave laborers. Also in the defendants' dock was Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the highest surviving chieftain of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), the Nazis' elite organization, which formed a second army and a second government within the power structure,⁹ as well as Nazi party officials, propagandists, and the high commanders of the German army and navy. The central figures in the Nazi hierarchy did not live to stand trial at Nuremberg; Adolf Hitler, his Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels, and the Chief of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, had committed suicide as the Allied armies closed in.

After the first and most important trial of major German war criminals, twelve more trials were held before American military tribunals in Nuremberg. Charges were brought against the German physicians who had conducted "experiments" on Jewish concentration camp inmates; against the *Einsatzgruppen* leaders; against Nazi judges, industrialists, military commanders, cabinet ministers, foreign-office officials. The testimony of the first trial and that of the other twelve was promptly collected and published; the former alone yielded 42 volumes of evidence, the latter, 15.¹⁰ Of the documents submitted by the prosecutors in all these cases, some 3,000 dealt with crimes against the Jews.¹¹

The Nuremberg trials were only a beginning. Each year for decades, in East and West Germany and in every country occupied by the Nazis, more war criminals and Nazi collaborators, both native and foreign, were brought to book, and the process continues to this day.¹² The most spectacular of these proceedings since Nuremberg took place in 1961, when Israel located, captured, tried—and ultimately convicted and executed—Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi official who had organized and carried out the deportations to the death camps.¹³ The Eichmann trial, held in Jerusalem, rounded out the known history of the "Final Solution"; but the cases involving lesser Nazi criminals also add to the mass of evidence documenting, beyond a shadow of possible doubt, the evolution of a policy that began with persecution and ended in genocide.

A Jew cannot be a citizen of the Reich. He does not have the right to vote and cannot hold public office . . .

Marriages between Jews and German nationals of German or related blood are forbidden. Marriages contracted in contravention of this law are void . . . Violations will be punished by imprisonment at hard labor.

Jews are forbidden to display the national flag or national colors.

—From the Nuremberg Laws, 1935

How It Began

Hitler's anti-Jewish policy advanced by stages, the first of them extending from his accession to power in 1933 to the beginning of World War II in 1939. Jews had been increasingly assimilated into the German society since the first half of the 19th century and had become prominent in the nation's industry, culture and arts; but a strong tradition of anti-Semitism endemic in Germany since the Middle Ages remained very much alive at the same time.¹⁴ With anti-Semitism established as official government policy in 1933, the expulsion of Jews from the cultural and economic life of Germany began.

April 1, 1933 marked the first major act of official persecution. On this day, the Government called for a boycott of all Jewish shops and businesses, and the event received tremendous attention throughout the world. Official anti-Jewish measures accelerated in the following two years, as Jews were expelled from civil service and the professions, and finally, with the passage of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, deprived of citizenship rights. The Nuremberg Laws, passed by acclamation in the Reichstag, the German parliament, also outlawed marriages and extra-marital sex relationships with Jews, making them crimes punishable by imprisonment. After 1939, the punishment was death.¹⁵

The racist doctrines of National Socialism, the ideological cornerstone of the Nazi state, held that the Germanic or Nordic race was destined by reason of "natural superiority" to rule humankind, whereas Jews were "parasites," a world plague to be eradicated. From the earliest days of the Nazi reign, this theory was expounded in every way possible—through films, newspapers, "educational" institutions like the "Institute for Exploration of the Jewish Question" (headed by Nazi theoretician Alfred Rosenberg), speeches by Hitler to the German people, and other propaganda devices.¹⁶

At first, the Nazis' aim was merely to "purge" Germany of Jews by forcing them to leave the country. But because other countries rigidly limited the number of refugees to whom they were willing to grant entrance visas, emigration was extremely difficult. Even so, as early as 1935 some 75,000 Jews had fled Germany. There was a huge exodus of artists, intellectuals and ordinary citizens from a country that was now hurling into public bonfires the works of Heine, Einstein, Freud and a host of other German-Jewish writers, artists and scientists, together with those of non-Jews declared "decadent" by the Nazis. Before the outbreak of the Second World War closed the gates to all emigration, more than half the Jews in Germany and Austria had managed to escape.

Those who were not fortunate enough to get away lived in ever-increasing peril. Jews were barred from schools, forbidden to enter parks and theaters, harassed and beaten on the streets. On November 9, 1938, a government-inspired wave of anti-Jewish violence spread throughout Germany and Austria. Using as a pretext the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a 17-year-old Polish Jew distraught over the deportation of his parents, the propaganda machinery mobilized the populace for "spontaneous" demonstrations. An impassioned anti-Semitic broadcast by Josef Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, launched an orgy of plunder and sadism that would become known in history as the *Kristallnacht* ("Crystal Night," the night of broken glass). The onslaught actually lasted several days, and before it was over, nearly 100 Jews had been killed and over 30,000 arrested.¹⁷

The *Kristallnacht* made news throughout the world. Journalists and consular officials transmitted eyewitness reports of the beatings, of the wanton destruction in which every synagogue in Germany was put to the torch and Jewish institutions and businesses were vandalized. Among those who recorded the events

was Sir Michael Bruce, a retired British diplomat, who described screaming, bloodthirsty people lustng for Jewish victims, and told of the efforts of a reporter for the *London News Chronicle* to protect an aged Jewish woman who had been dragged from her home by the mob.

Then, Bruce wrote, the mob's hate turned to a hospital for Jewish children, mainly cripples or consumptives. "In minutes the windows had been smashed and the doors forced. When we arrived the swine were driving the wee mites out over the broken glass, barefooted and wearing nothing but their nightshirts. The nurses, doctors and attendants were being kicked and beaten by the mob leaders, most of whom were women."¹⁸

In a special twist of sadism, the Nazis fined the Jewish community a billion marks in "damages" for the destruction that had taken place. A vicious assault with the twofold purpose of enriching the German treasury and intensifying anti-Jewish sentiment, the *Kristallnacht* was a turning point, signaling doom for German Jewry. The warfare waged against Jews was now total. They were forbidden to sell goods and services of any kind, or to own retail stores.¹⁹ In increasing numbers, they were arrested and deported, their property and assets confiscated. On January 30, 1939, in a speech to the Reichstag, Adolf Hitler offered a bold prophecy: In the event "international Jewish financiers" succeeded "in plunging the nations once more into a world war," he said, the consequence would be "the obliteration of the Jewish race in Europe."²⁰ What the world audience which heard this speech did not know was that Hitler was not just making a prediction—he was announcing his intention to make that prediction come true.

The mission of the SS and police in Poland was by no means confined to customary security tasks in occupied territory. It was, on the contrary a far-reaching program for the total extermination of Polish Jews and the destruction of Polish culture.

The program was secret in the sense that Himmler did not publish it broadcast, but in the nature of things it could not remain a secret where there were eyes to see and ears to hear...

-Telford Taylor²¹

The Murder Plan

Brigadier General Telford Taylor, U.S. Chief Counsel for War Crimes in the Office of the U.S. Military Government, and an authority on the relationship between the German Wehrmacht and the Nazis, documents “the virtual autonomy of Himmler’s police forces and special SS units” in Poland, and the special task assigned them by Hitler.

From the Nazis’ invasion of Poland in September 1939 through their subsequent conquest of virtually the entire European continent, special directives concerning the Jews were issued by the SS, to which Hitler had assigned the handling of the “Final Solution.” The documents, which eventually fell into Allied hands, indicate clearly that as early as 1939 the SS was making murder plans. For example, an order issued by Reinhard Heydrich, the SS officer in charge, to the heads of his *Einsatzgruppen* three weeks after the invasion of Poland outlined the ghettoization that was to be the first phase of the Holocaust. Jews were to be gathered into “concentration points,” the order stated—“as few concentration points as possible,” so as to “facilitate subsequent measures.” Concentration points were to be “only cities which are rail junctions, or at least located along railroad lines.”²²

The ominous meaning of these and later directives became clear at a conference of high state and SS officials held in Wannsee, a Berlin suburb, on January 20, 1942—when the death camps were already under construction or completed. The purpose of the meeting was to coordinate the role of various government agencies in the “Final Solution.” The minutes—also among the documents captured after the war—show that Heydrich, at Hitler’s directive, outlined to the assembled officials the details of the policy toward Jews which the SS had been putting into effect, leaving somewhat vague how much of the “new” policy was for the future and how much was already being carried out.²³

Emigration, Heydrich announced, was to be replaced by evacuation of Jews to the East, in accordance with previous authorization by the Führer. The new procedures, Heydrich continued, were to be “regarded only as provisional options; even now practical experience is being gathered that is of major significance in view of the coming final solution of the Jewish question.” As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Jackson later noted at Nuremberg, the Nazis consistently employed abstract or euphemistic language when discussing mass murder plans; the Wannsee conference was a prime example. To Heydrich’s audience, accustomed to the language of indirection employed in such circumstances, the meaning of “evacuation to the East” was clear: The Jews were to be annihilated.

The “practical experience” to which Heydrich referred was the mass killing of Jews in occupied territories that had begun immediately upon the German invasion of the Soviet Union in mid-1941. Detailed procedures were set forth at Wannsee for the deportation of Jews from all of the occupied or annexed countries to the newly established death camps, a sweeping operation in which Europe was to be “combed through [for Jews] from West to East.” The purpose for which Polish Jews had earlier been gathered into “concentration points,” all of them near railway lines, was now clear: All of Europe’s Jews were to be transported by rail to the death camps.

The death figure in the ghetto still hovers around 5000 per month. A few days ago, the first case of hunger-cannibalism was recorded...

—Top secret report of Warsaw District Propaganda Division of the German Government in Poland, March 21, 1942²⁴

The Ghettos

The Nazi occupation of Poland was marked virtually from the outset by rampaging violence and sadism against Jews, with the most extreme forms of cruelty reserved for the Orthodox. In a year-long reenactment of the *Kristallnacht*, Jews were wantonly murdered, synagogues desecrated and Jewish places of business plundered, either directly by the Germans or in pogroms in which the non-Jewish population was encouraged to take part. Simultaneously, with some delays, the ghettoization of the Jewish community was instituted. Jews were sealed into segregated areas, to be run by *Judenräte* or Jewish Councils directly responsible to the Germans.²⁵

Jewish families uprooted from nearly 2,000 towns and cities in Poland were crowded into slum sections apportioned to them in a few cities; half a million, including deportees from Germany and Austria, were packed into the Warsaw ghetto, into an area that earlier had barely accommodated 35,000. A report on one apartment house in the Warsaw ghetto in January 1942 states: "Number of residents—1,613; rooms—153. Only the orphans' rooms and children's club room are heated. No running water, and toilets are not working...persons stricken with dysentery remain here and even persons with broken limbs are not sent to the hospital...The refugees are in rags and tatters. Some are completely naked. The number of deceased during the month was 183. The mortality rate is 11.5 percent..."²⁶

With allotted rations of not quite 1,000 calories a day, an amount clearly intended to reduce their number by starvation, the Jews struggled hopelessly against hunger, disease, and exhaustion by slave labor. It was possible neither to leave the ghetto—Jews were forbidden on pain of death to go outside its confines—nor to sustain life inside it. Famine and disease took a daily toll and left the ghetto streets so covered with the dying and the dead that quick burial was impossible.

It was the most remarkable fact of ghetto life that, amid death and destruction, a vigorous culture flourished. Abandoned to a world ruled by starvation and terror, ghetto inhabitants drew on their religious, psychological, spiritual and communal resources. Secret schools, theatres and self-help organizations were established and maintained. Hospitals and clinics were operated, with makeshift medical instruments and secretly manufactured medicines; doctors made clandestine house calls.²⁷ Though one of the earliest steps the Nazis took in their determination to break the Jewish spirit was to burn down the synagogues, ghetto residents continued to gather for worship and for studying Torah.²⁸ And in nearly every ghetto, underground newspapers reported what was really happening in the outside world.²⁹

It was to be expected from the first that the Jewish problem in the East could not be solved by pogroms alone. On the other hand, in accordance with the basic orders, the mopping-up work of the Security Police had as its goal the annihilation, as comprehensive as possible, of the Jews. Sonderkommandos reinforced by selected units... therefore carried out extensive executions both in the towns and in the countryside.

*-Roundup Report of Einsatzgruppe A to October 15, 1941*³⁰

The Killing Squads

After the German invasion in 1941, the mass annihilation of Jews in the occupied Soviet territories began. The killings were facilitated by detailed advance plans. Secret orders from the German military command permitted the SS *Einsatzgruppen* to move freely behind the front lines and to operate autonomously. These instructions, issued by Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel and later introduced into evidence at Nuremberg, referred to the “special tasks” which the Führer had entrusted to the SS.³¹ The special tasks were to kill Jews.

The procedure was described at Nuremberg by one of the SS commanders. The Jews were first rounded up and told they were going to be relocated. They were then led to the place of execution, where they were shot, standing or kneeling. In mid-1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* were operating all over the Eastern front in line with this procedure. Later, more advanced technology for mass murder was developed. Gas vans, whose occupants could be killed in 10 or 15 minutes, were introduced, the commander testified, and orders were issued to use such vans for killing women and children, so the commandos would be spared the unnecessary spiritual strain of shooting them. The commandos, however, preferred the spiritual strain to the task of unloading gas

vans of corpses soiled with excrement, and so shooting continued to be their primary killing method.³²

The men who performed these deeds, and the men who commanded them, were not, as might be supposed, drawn from the lower ranks of society, or from the criminal class. On the contrary: The *Einsatzgruppen* had been selected especially for their qualities of leadership and ideological commitment. By and large professional men, they included attorneys, teachers and physicians. One of those to stand trial at Nuremberg was a Protestant pastor, Ernst Biberstein. Another, Otto Ohlendorf, commander of a battalion which moved through the Ukraine, town by town and city by city, systematically slaughtering the Jews, was a Doctor of Law who had attended three different universities before joining the Nazi party and the SS.

The prosecutors at Nuremberg exacted testimony from Ohlendorf regarding the liquidation of Jewish children. Ohlendorf had told the tribunal that the purpose of killing Jews and Communists had been to achieve a permanent solution to the dangers they posed to Germany. But what kind of danger were the children thought to pose? For what reason, the prosecutor asked, had the children been massacred? Ohlendorf's reply was a reasoned statement of the Nazi position, reasonably presented and buttressed by Nazi logic. Killing the children was very simple to explain, he told the court, if one started from the fact that the order tried to achieve not merely security, but permanent security. The children would grow up; and as children of parents who had been killed, they would constitute a danger no smaller than their parents. Twice, in separate testimony, Ohlendorf explained the German "position" regarding the Jews, and the actions of the *Einsatzgruppen*: "The order was the Jewish population should be totally exterminated." Did this order include the children? "Yes."³³

The *Einsatzgruppen* moved with lightning speed from one Jewish population center to another, but they sometimes left handfuls of survivors who had succeeded in hiding, or had been wounded and left for dead. One such survivor, Rivka Yoselewska, lived to testify to the fate typical of every Jewish community the commandos swept through. The witness told how the killers had first led the Jews of Pinsk to a large pit. Even with the sight of the naked Jews before her, she had clung to the hope that the Germans meant only to torture them. Ordered like the rest to take off her clothes, she did so and held on to her six-year-old daughter. The shooting began, the SS firing into the back of each Jew's head.

First her mother and father were shot and kicked into the ditch. Then her grandmother, who had been comforting two grandchildren in her arms. The witness's sister was next. Pointing the gun at her, as she stood naked, praying for her life, the SS man looked into her eyes and shot straight at her. When Yoselewska's own turn came, he asked, "Whom do I shoot first, your daughter or you?" But the bullet, meant to kill, only grazed her. Kicked into a ditch full of dead and dying Jews, she lay there until, regaining consciousness, she pulled herself out from under the bodies suffocating her. For three days she sat dazed among the corpses, until a farmer rescued her and brought her to the Partisans in the forest.³⁴

Innumerable reports filed by the *Einsatzgruppen* commanders themselves bear out the witness's testimony. It was their duty to declare the number of Jews killed, and the location and date of each "action"—the only facts of importance to their superiors. Impersonal as they are, the reports nevertheless point up how hard it is to put the facts of mass murder baldly, without adornments and rationalizations:

"Operational Situation Report, U.S.S.R. No. 106, October 7, 1941...An adequate number of apartments has been evacuated through the liquidation of approximately 35,000 Jews on 29 and 30 September 1941, so that now shelter for the homeless is secured..."

"Operational Report, U.S.S.R. No. 94, September 25, 1941. Since...Jewish propaganda activity was especially heavy in Lithuania, the number of persons liquidated in this area by *Einsatzkommando 3* has risen to 75,000."³⁵

The testimony about the mobile killing units that history is most likely to remember, however, comes neither from a Nazi source nor a Jewish one, but from a German civilian. Hermann Friedrich Graebe, an engineer who was in charge of a construction firm in Dubnow in the occupied Ukraine during 1942, told the Nuremberg tribunal how, when he heard from his foreman that 1,500 Jews were being killed daily, he undertook to find out for himself if it was true. Unflinchingly reportorial and objective, Graebe's recording of that truth evokes the horror of the Holocaust with a power matched by few other witnesses. Accompanied by his foreman, he had driven to the site where the killings were said to take place. There indeed he saw trucks, and great mounds of earth, 30 meters long and two meters high, and people being driven off the trucks by armed Ukrainian militia under the

supervision of an SS man. Who the people were was unmistakable; on the back and front of their clothes they wore the regulation yellow patches marking them as Jews.

The people who had got off the trucks—men, women, and children of all ages—had to undress upon the orders of an SS-man, who carried a riding or dog whip...Without screaming or weeping these people undressed, stood around in family groups, kissed each other, said farewells and waited for a sign from another SS-man, who stood near the pit, also with a whip in his hand.

During the 15 minutes that I stood near the pit I heard no complaint or plea for mercy. I watched a family of about 8 persons, a man and woman, both about 50 with their children of about 1, 8, and 10, and two grown-up daughters of about 20 to 24. An old woman with snow-white hair was holding the one-year-old child in her arms and singing to it, and tickling it. The child was cooing with delight. The couple were looking on with tears in their eyes. The father was holding the hand of a boy about 10 years old and speaking to him softly; the boy was fighting his tears. The father pointed toward the sky, stroked his head, and seemed to explain something to him. At that moment the SS man at the pit shouted something to his comrade. The latter counted off about 20 persons and instructed them to go behind the earth mound. Among them was the family which I have mentioned. I well remember a girl, slim, and with black hair, who, as she passed close to me, pointed to herself and said "23."

People in the pit were wedged together and lying on top of each other, so that only their heads were visible. Some of those shot prior to Graebe's arrival were still moving, lifting their arms and turning their heads. The SS man who had done the shooting sat at the edge of the pit, already two-thirds full with 1,000 people, his feet dangling. He had a Tommy gun on his knees and was smoking a cigarette.

The people, completely naked, went down some steps which were cut in the clay wall of the pit and clambered over the heads of the people lying there...They lay down in front of the dead or injured people; some caressed those who were still alive and spoke to them in a low voice. Then I heard a series of shots. I looked into the pit and saw that the bodies were twitching....When I walked back, round the mound, I noticed another truckload of people which had just arrived. This time it included sick and infirm persons. An old, very thin woman with terribly thin legs was undressed by others who were already naked, while two people held her up. The woman appeared to be paralyzed...I left with Moennikes [the foreman] and drove in my car back to Dubno.³⁶

By making use of all available labour, work on Crematorium II has been completed, save for a few constructional details....The ovens were fired by the chief engineer of the firm that did the work –Topf & Sons of Erfurt–during his tour of inspection, and they functioned perfectly.

–Report by the Director, SS Construction Department at Auschwitz, 1943³⁷

The Death Factories

It was clear from the beginning that the executors of the “Final Solution” would have to develop more efficient means than shooting if they were going to annihilate all the Jews. Despite the efforts of the *Einsatzgruppen*, and the efforts of their SS superiors and the German High Command to facilitate the killing, the number of Jews remained large. A report from the commander of a squad that had massacred 33,000 Jews at Kiev put the matter succinctly: A total of 75,000 Jews in the area had been liquidated thus far, he said, but “today it is already clear that even with such tactics a final solution of the Jewish problem will not be possible.”³⁸ In much of occupied Europe, roundups and immediate massacres of Jews were impossible for logistic or political reasons; what had been done with comparative secrecy in Poland and the Soviet Union could not be done the same way in Northern and Western Europe.

Because of all this, Adolf Eichmann, head of the Jewish Affairs Division of the Reich Security Office, and Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz, began investigating the possibility of building huge gas installations to duplicate on a vast scale the efficiency of the killing vans. By early 1942, the Germans had added to their extensive network of forced-labor and concentration camps six extermination centers equipped with gas cham-

bers, all in Poland. Their names are by now well known: Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka, Chelmno, Belzec and Sobibor. Except for Auschwitz, which also had a large slave-labor division, these camps had no other function than annihilation.³⁹

As the work of killing proceeded, the technology improved; German industrial firms vied with one another to provide the death machinery. Captured documents attest that mass murder became, indeed, a cornerstone of German industry. Quite unself-consciously, a manufacturing firm called C. H. Kori, in a bid for business, reminded the SS Central Construction Office that the company had already handled satisfactory installations at Dachau and Lublin. The letter went on:

Following our verbal discussion regarding the delivery of equipment of simple construction for the burning of bodies, we are submitting plans for our perfected cremation ovens which operate with coal and which have hitherto given full satisfaction.

We suggest two crematorial furnaces for the building planned... We guarantee the effectiveness of the cremation ovens as well as their durability, the use of the best material and our faultless workmanship....

Heil Hitler.⁴⁰

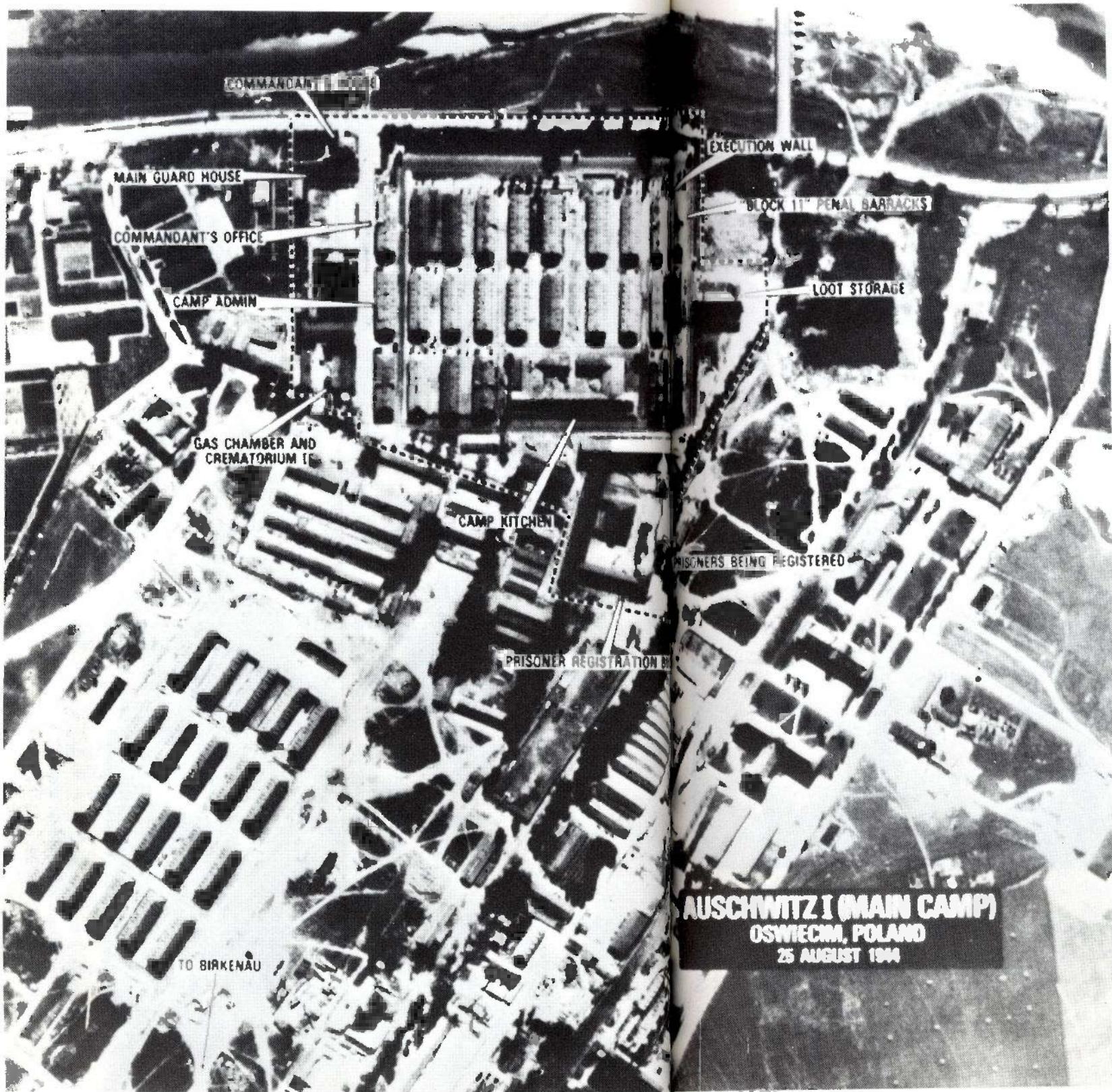
In the winter and spring of 1941-42, the first Jews were dispatched to the death camps at Chelmno, Belzec and Auschwitz. They were told, as were those who came after them, that they were being "resettled" at "work camps." SS officer Kurt Gerstein, assigned to develop improved killing techniques, was one witness to the gassings. Totally overcome by the horror he had witnessed, Gerstein left Belzec determined to tell what he had seen. A Catholic, he tried first to reach the Vatican but was turned away. He finally found a Swedish official willing to relay the news to the Allies, and in 1945 he himself also delivered a written statement to Allied military officials.

What Gerstein saw at Belzec was the process of destruction that was standard practice at the death camps. There were barracks marked "Barber," "Cloak Room" and "Valuables"; farther on, there was a passageway enclosed by barbed wire, with signs reading "To Baths and Inhalators"; a set of stairs; and then, by the rear wall, an edifice with large wooden doors. On its roof was a copper Star of David. This was the gas chamber.

The first trains Gerstein saw arrived from Lvov—45 cars holding a total of 6,700 people, of whom 1,450 had died on the way. Behind the barbed-wire windows of the train stood terrified men,



Women prisoners at a Nazi camp,
guarded by kapos (inmate trustees) with sticks
and camp guards with watchdogs. (FPG photo.)



The Auschwitz death camp, accidentally included in a U.S. Army reconnaissance photograph of a nearby chemical plant in August 1944. The gas chamber, crematorium and other structures, including the storage warehouse for loot taken from the victims, are all clearly identified. (Wide World photo.)



*Sentencing at Nuremberg,
October 1946.*

*The top surviving Nazi
leaders, seated in the two
rows directly in front
of the helmeted soldiers,
listen silently as the
International Military
Tribunal pronounces judgment
on them. (Acme photo.)*

women and children. Two hundred Ukrainian workers detailed for the task tore open the doors of the train and, with leather whips, drove the Jews out of the cars. Loudspeakers directed them to take off all their clothing, artificial limbs and eyeglasses, and to turn in money and valuables. Then, flanked by the Ukrainians, the Jews—men, women, young girls and babies—were marched, completely nude, from the trains, directly past Gerstein and the camp captain, who stood on the ramp in front of the death chambers. An SS man assured them that they were going to be put through a harmless disinfection procedure; but most of them were not deceived, Gerstein observed.

They walked up the small wooden flight of stairs and entered the death chambers, most without a word, pushed forward by those behind them. One Jewish woman of about forty, her eyes flaming torches, cursed the murderers; after several whiplashes by Captain Wirth in person, she disappeared into the gas chamber. Many people pray, while others ask: "Who will give us water for washing the dead?..."

Inside the chambers, SS men crowd the people. "Fill them up well," Wirth had ordered, "700-800 of them to every 25 square meters." The doors are shut.

But the diesel engine that is to pump in the poison gas fails to start. There is a long delay before it begins. The rest of the people from the train stand naked, in the cold. Those locked in the gas chambers wait. Gerstein records it all.

Yes, I see it all and I wait. My stop watch showed it all, 50 minutes, 70 minutes, and the diesel did not start! The people wait inside the gas chambers. In vain. They can be heard weeping....After two hours and 49 minutes...the diesel started. Up to that moment, the people shut up in those four crowded chambers were still alive, four times 750 persons in four times 45 cubic meters! Another 25 minutes elapsed. Many were already dead, that could be seen through the small window....Finally, after 32 minutes, all were dead.

Afterwards, Gerstein records, a great banquet is held in honor of the visitors. In a speech paying tribute to the employees of the camp, one of the visitors, a hygiene professor from the University of Marburg, refers to the "great work" done at the camp, and tells all those assembled: "When one sees the bodies of the Jews, one understands the greatness of your work!"⁴¹

Even after the defeat of nazism, the technicians were proud of how efficiently their murders had been accomplished. At

Nuremberg, Hoess referred to the many improvements made at his installation, as opposed to Treblinka: At Auschwitz, he told the tribunal, the gas chamber was built to process 2,000 people at one time, whereas those at Treblinka accommodated only 200. Another "improvement" was that "at Treblinka the victims almost always knew that they were to be exterminated," while at Auschwitz "we endeavored to fool the victims into thinking that they were to go through a delousing process." He added: "Very frequently, women would hide their children under their clothes, but of course when we found them we would send the children to be exterminated . . ."⁴²

Hoess commemorated these advances in the killing procedure with a passage in the autobiography he wrote while awaiting trial and execution in Poland: "During the spring of 1942 hundreds of vigorous men and women walked all unsuspecting to their death in the gas chambers, under the blossom-laden fruit trees of the 'cottage' orchard."⁴³ The fruit trees Hoess referred to were located adjacent to the gas chambers.

*The persecution of the Jews has hit the Danes in the
sorest point in their conception of justice....
We couldn't yield to the German threats when the
Jews' well-being was at stake....If we desert
the Jews in the hour of their misery, we desert
our native country.*

*-Christmas Møller,
Danish Minister of Trade, 1943⁴⁴*

As the Horror Spread

In 1943, Julius Streicher triumphantly told readers of *Der Stürmer* that the Jews had disappeared from Europe, and that the "Jewish reservoir of the East" had ceased to exist.⁴⁵ The first half of his claim never came true; but the second half had been very nearly borne out. As the destruction of Jews in Poland and the occupied parts of the Soviet Union neared completion, "Final Solution" measures were undertaken in every other occupied European country and every German satellite.⁴⁶

How successful the Germans were in achieving their objectives in a given country depended in large part upon the amount of cooperation given them by the particular government, as well as on the attitude of the non-Jewish inhabitants toward their non-Jewish countrymen. In all or nearly all Nazi-controlled countries, including Germany itself, some non-Jews secretly helped or sheltered Jews,⁴⁷ but the number who did so varied greatly. In some countries, such as France, Italy and especially Denmark, Jews received significant, sometimes decisive help from their non-Jewish compatriots. In most of Eastern Europe, on the other hand, where there was a long history of entrenched anti-Semitism, the German murder machine not only proceeded unfettered; it was aided by the complicity of the native population, and secret helpers of the Jews were few. This is one important

reason why, by and large, Jewish losses were proportionately heaviest in the Eastern countries.

Seizing men, women and children in an occupied country and deporting them to the death camps was no easy matter without help from local authorities. Wherever there was marked local opposition to the deportation of the Jews, a considerable portion survived. The one exception was Holland, where a brutal occupation and ironclad internal control by the Germans overcame all popular support for the Jews.⁴⁸

Of the occupied European countries, Denmark alone undertook an active struggle to save its Jewish population. While it is true that the Germans were eager to preserve good relations with Denmark, and proceeded more cautiously in imposing their authority there than in other occupied European countries, the protective stand the Danes took toward Danish Jewry—a stand made clear to the Germans from the beginning—was decisive.

Because the Danes struggled actively to counter the dissemination of anti-Semitic propaganda, the Germans hesitated to introduce anti-Jewish measures. Workers, students, doctors, lawyers and teachers took upon themselves the duty of protecting the rights of their Jewish fellow citizens. While Jews elsewhere were being isolated, forced to wear the yellow star, hounded out of economic life and finally deported to the death camps, the Danish courts were busily prosecuting anti-Semites. When the authors of a slanderous anti-Semitic article appealed a stiff jail sentence and a fine, the courts responded by increasing the jail sentence.

Thus, Danish democracy was prepared for the test which came in October 1943, when the Germans moved to effect the "Final Solution" for Danish Jewry. Alerted by a sympathetic German shipping official to the impending deportations, the Resistance moved quickly into action, and all Denmark became one large underground network dedicated to saving the Jews. With the cooperation of the Swedish Government, Danes planned, financed and executed one of the most extraordinary rescue operations in history, managing to ferry almost all of the Danish Jews to safety to Sweden—a heroic undertaking even more remarkable when compared with the behavior of other countries under Nazi domination.

In France, where a quarter of the Jewish population was deported to the death camps, the collaborationist Vichy Government, the French military and the police extended every cooperation to Eichmann's deportation experts. Not only did the Prime Minister, Pierre Laval, agree to deport all foreign born or "state-

less" Jews; to their numbers he added, on his own, several thousand Jewish children left behind by parents already arrested. The Germans had neither required nor anticipated this bonus of deportees. When Pastor Marc Boegner, a leading French Protestant, pleaded that the children be saved, assuring Laval that French families would adopt them, Laval retorted that this was precisely what he did not want. "Not one of them must remain in France," he declared adamantly.⁴⁹

At the Eichmann trial, a witness would tell of the fate of those children, arbitrarily dispatched to a transit camp at Drancy, en route to Auschwitz. They arrived in buses, the witness recalled, frightened, alone, under the guard of French police. Some were barely two or three years old and did not know their names. The adult Jewish prisoners, also waiting at Drancy for shipment to the gas chambers, put little disks on the children, with new names which they had given them, and took turns caring for them.

Part of the tragedy of those victimized by the Holocaust was that they had not only to experience undreamed-of suffering, but to observe it as well. A vignette recounted at the Eichmann trial testifies to the pain of such observation. René Blum, a brother of Léon Blum, a former Premier of France, was among the deportees being held at the transit camp at Drancy, the witness reported. Together one day, they saw among the captured children a boy of seven or eight, whose clothes, once of good quality, were in tatters. "My name is Jacques Stern," he told René Blum, who had bent down and asked his name, adding that his father worked in an office and his mother played the piano. "She plays well," the boy said.

Though they knew otherwise, the adults always told the children, when they asked, that they would soon be reunited with their parents. Thus, when the boy asked whether he would soon leave the camp and rejoin his parents, they told him that in two or three days he would join his mother. Then the boy took from his pocket a piece of army biscuit he had saved and said, "I'll give it to mother." When Blum reached down to caress him, the boy, who a moment before had seemed carefree and gay, broke into terrible sobbing. A few days later, all 4,000 children were en route to Auschwitz.⁵⁰

A non-Jewish observer, a French social worker named Annette Monod, described the children's departure. The morning the children were shipped to Auschwitz, she reports, the weather was cold; the children, half asleep, sat on the ground, each with a little bundle of clothes, sometimes with a doll's head or a wheel of a

truck or other toys treasured because they were symbols of their lost homes. The gendarmes tried to take roll call, but found it was impossible; the children did not respond to their names. One tiny boy strode up to a gendarme and began to play with the whistle hanging from his belt. The children were assembled only 200 yards from the train, Miss Monod recalled, but it was a long way for small children.

I noticed one gendarme take the bundle of a boy of about four or five to help him walk. But he was immediately reprimanded by an adjutant, who told him rudely that a French soldier did not carry the bags of a Jew....

Once we were in the station, the children were loaded onto the trains in a sudden burst of speed....

It was at this point that the children felt frightened. They didn't want to go and started to cry...Jacquot, a little five-year-old of whom I was particularly fond, started shouting for me: "I want to get down, I want to stay with Mademoiselle...." The door of the car was shut and bolted, but Jacquot pushed his hand through a gap between two planks and continued to call for me, moving his fingers. The adjutant mentioned above hit him on the hand.⁵¹

Not a single one of the deported Jewish children survived. The bulk of the French Jews, however, did survive, thanks in good part to anti-deportation pressures brought to bear on the Vichy Government by church leaders, and to the considerable help made available to them by sympathetic friends and neighbors.

No less crucial to their survival was the help Jews received from the Italian Army in the zones of France it occupied; for Axis partner though it was, Italy was determined not to yield up Jews to be murdered. On this subject a ceaseless flow of correspondence issued from SS officials and the German Ambassador, complaining of Italy's intransigence. "The attitude of the Italians is and was incomprehensible," declared Eichmann's deputy, SS First Lieutenant Heinz Röthke, in a memo to Berlin. Italian military authorities and the Italian police, he complained, "protect the Jews by every means in their power," and despite some 20 earlier reports sent to the Reich Security Head Office, the Germans had been unable to effect any change in the Italians' attitude. Another SS official complained that the Italians not only permitted "no restrictions in respect of the Jews" but, on the contrary, took Jews of all nationalities in their zone under their protection and forbade the Vichy Government to enforce measures even against Jews of French nationality.⁵²

Not only did Hitler's principal ally, Italy, refuse to hand over a single Jew; in sharp contrast to Vichy France, whose soldiers and police zealously hunted Jews down and deported them, it interfered actively in deportation efforts. The contrast was particularly sharp in the area around Grenoble, a major French city under Italian occupation. There, Vichy police rounded Jews up for deportation to Auschwitz, only to be forced to release them at the order of the Italian military commander.⁵³ In Annecy, also in the Italian zone, the barracks where French gendarmes had imprisoned Jews in preparation for sending them to Auschwitz were surrounded by Italian troops, who forced the release of the prisoners.⁵⁴

In Italian-occupied Greece, Hungary and Croatia, the story was the same: a head-on confrontation between Italian humanism and German determination to wipe out Europe's entire Jewish population. In the 1930s, Italy had enacted anti-Jewish legislation of its own, in keeping with its role as a Fascist ally; now, aware that the Jews were being murdered, Italian foreign-office officials wrote warning reports about crimes "which no alliance can make Italy a partner to." As a result, Jews remained safe from deportation not only in Italy but wherever there was an Italian military presence. This immunity lasted until 1943, when the Germans overran Italy. Despite the efforts of the Italian people, some 8,000 Italian Jews, 20 percent of the Jewish population, ultimately perished in camps or in Italy itself.⁵⁵

The Italians were not alone among Germany's allies in refusing to cooperate in mass murder. In Bulgaria (an unenthusiastic Axis partner with an earlier record of active opposition to anti-Semitism, which had entered the war on Germany's side in order to regain territory previously lost), the deportation of most Jews was averted when the Parliament and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church raised strong protests, though not before the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia had been sent to their death.⁵⁶ Finland had an alliance with Germany; yet Finland's leaders unequivocally rejected all requests to deport Jews for "resettlement in the East." "Finland is an honest nation," the Finnish Foreign Minister, Rolf Witting, told the Germans. "We prefer to die with the Jews; we shall never betray them." As a result of this courageous stance, the Jews of Finland escaped the fate of the vast majority of their coreligionists elsewhere.⁵⁷

*Brothers! It is better to die in battle in the ghetto
than to be carried away...like sheep...*

*Jewish people, go out into the squares. Anyone who
has no weapon should take an ax, and he who has no ax
should take a crowbar or a bludgeon.*

For our ancestors!

For our murdered children!

*-Manifesto of the Jewish Resistance in Vilna,
September 1, 1943⁵⁸*

Jewish Resistance

From the earliest years of the postwar era, the question of Jewish resistance to the Nazis has been debated. At the end of the war, as well as for a time thereafter, it was assumed that the Jews had mounted no resistance at all except in the battle of the Warsaw ghetto. This assumption resulted from lack of information concerning the Jewish response to the Nazis—from the fact that what was known about the Holocaust at that time was derived mostly from German sources.

The German records and accounts were devastatingly reliable in documenting the destruction of European Jewry. But they were incomplete and unreliable where the response of the Jews was concerned; for German propaganda goals required that the Jews be seen as cowards who failed to fight back. Jewish sources, hardly available until much later, and far fewer in number, were the first to throw light on the extent of Jewish resistance.⁵⁹

What the Germans concealed or did not know was gradually revealed as the Jewish records emerged, documenting the resistance which had taken place not only in the ghetto of Warsaw, but also in those of Bialystok, Vilna and Czestochowa, in the Polish forests, in the death camps of Treblinka and Sobibor, and in Auschwitz itself.⁶⁰ Little was known of these and innumerable

more obscure episodes of resistance because, in most cases, none of those who took part lived to tell of them.

The Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943, unlike all others, is well documented in the Nuremberg proceedings. The Nazis had recorded this event with what the American prosecutor described as "Teutonic thoroughness as to detail, illustrated with photographs to authenticate its almost incredible text." The report—entitled "The Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw Is No More"—was written by SS Major General Jürgen Stroop, the commander of the troops who fought the Jewish combatants.

A prime piece of evidence for the prosecution because it exemplified the program of deliberate and total annihilation, the Stroop report was also memorable for its inadvertent rendering of Jewish heroism and German savagery. Torn between the need to demean the Jewish combatants and the need to explain to his Berlin superiors why his forces could not break their resistance for almost a month, Stroop's report moves tortuously between citations of SS heroics and examples of the tenacity of the Jews. Stroop describes Jews who fell into German hands shouting imprecations and curses at Germany, the Führer and the German soldiers, and recounts what happened when he decided to break the resistance by setting the ghetto on fire:

...Not infrequently, the Jews stayed in the burning buildings until, because of the heat and the fear of being burned alive, they preferred to jump down from the upper stories after having thrown mattresses and other upholstered articles into the street from the burning buildings. With their bones broken, they still tried to crawl across the street into blocks of buildings which had not yet been set on fire or were only partially in flames.⁶¹

Though the Germans were expert propagandists, particularly in the use of photographs, the propaganda effect of both the written report and the pictures that accompanied it was undone by the truths which they revealed. One photograph shows women and children marching, their hands raised in surrender; the caption beneath states that Jewish "bandits"—the Nazis' word for Jewish resistance fighters—were driven from their hiding places.

More than 15 years after the Nuremberg Tribunal heard details of the Jewish uprising as described in the Stroop report, another tribunal heard about the same event, unfolded this time by a Jewish resistance fighter. The Israeli judges presiding over the trial of Adolf Eichmann heard the testimony of Zivia Lubetkin Zuckerman. As ever, the victims and the perpetrators agree on

the basic facts; but whereas Stroop renders the Jews as de-humanized, animalistic creatures who crawl across streets with broken bones, Zuckerman describes living, breathing people.

We were happy and laughing. We knew, we felt, then that the end of the Germans was near. We knew they would defeat us, of course, but we knew they would pay dearly for it....When we threw our grenades and saw German blood on the streets of Warsaw, after they had been flooded with so much Jewish blood and tears, a great joy possessed us....They, the great fighters, were fleeing from our primitive homemade grenades....Of course they came back....They had ammunition, water and bread...all the things we lacked....In the ghetto people were embracing and kissing each other, although everyone knew it was almost certain he would fall. Rabbi Meyzel put his hand on my head and said...“Bless you, it will be good to die now....”⁶²

It would no doubt be difficult to calculate within a hundred thousand or so one way or another, exactly how many people were victims of the Nazi policy of extermination. That fact in itself demonstrates the enormity of the policy.

—Sir Hartley Shawcross,
British Chief Prosecutor at Nuremberg⁶³

The Statistics of Death

As a witness at Nuremberg, Rudolf Hoess provided a detailed accounting of the destruction process at Auschwitz, the largest of the death centers. Like so much of the record-keeping of the perpetrators, his report is rich in the statistics of murder. At Auschwitz alone, Hoess testified, 2½ million victims had been gassed and burned during his tenure, and at least another half million had been killed by deliberate starvation and disease. Those three million dead, estimated Hoess, represented 70 to 80 percent of all persons sent to Auschwitz as prisoners. Many of them had first been subjected to medical "experiments," others exploited for slave labor.

We executed about 400,000 Hungarian Jews alone at Auschwitz in the summer of 1944....

The "final solution" of the Jewish question meant the complete extermination of all Jews in Europe. I was ordered to establish extermination facilities at Auschwitz in June 1941. At that time there were already three other extermination camps in the Government General....I visited Treblinka to find out how they carried out their extermination. The Camp Commandant at Treblinka told me that he had liquidated 80,000 in the course of one-half year. He was principally concerned with liquidating all the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto. He used monoxide gas and I did not think that his methods were very efficient. So when I set

up the extermination building at Auschwitz, I used Cyclon B, which was a crystallized Prussian Acid which we dropped into the death chamber from a small opening....⁶⁴

By such means the death camps finished what the *Einsatzgruppen* had begun. In all, the "Final Solution" wiped out approximately 3 million Jews in Poland (90 percent of the country's Jewish population), and approximately 228,000 in the Baltic countries: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (also 90 percent). In Soviet White Russia, 245,000 Jews (65 percent) were massacred by the *Einsatzgruppen* and their non-German collaborators, in the Soviet Ukraine 900,000 (60 percent), and in Russia proper 107,000 (11 percent). Jewish losses in Hungary totaled 450,000 (70 percent); in Rumania 300,000 (50 percent); in Germany and Austria 210,000 (90 percent); in the Netherlands 105,000 (75 percent). France lost 90,000 (26 percent) of its Jews, the Bohemian and Moravian regions of Czechoslovakia 80,000 (89 percent), the rest of Czechoslovakia 75,000 (83 percent). As for Jews from Greece, 54,000 (77 percent) were killed; from Belgium, 40,000 (60 percent); from Yugoslavia, 26,000 (60 percent); from Bulgaria, 14,000 (22 percent); from Italy, 8,000 (20 percent); from Luxembourg, 1,000 (also 20 percent). Norway's small Jewish population was reduced by 900—one-half of the total.⁶⁵

By 1945, the effort to exterminate the Jews of Europe had very nearly succeeded. Approximately six million had been murdered, the religious and cultural life of East European Jewry extinguished forever. The figures tell what happened and to whom; but the human agony they represent cannot be communicated in numbers.

As the American prosecutor, Justice Jackson, continually reminded the court, for proof that the Germans had engaged in a war of extermination against the Jews, one had only to take the word of the Germans themselves. The cold, stark facts and figures, drawn from the defendants' own records, defied rebuttal. Reviewing all the evidence, the judges at the trial of the Major War Criminals pointed out that "Adolf Eichmann, who had been put in charge of this program by Hitler, has estimated that the policy pursued resulted in the killing of 6 million Jews....The persecution of the Jews at the hands of the Nazi Government has been proved in the greatest detail before the Tribunal," the judges declared.⁶⁶

In the mass of evidence which led so inexorably to this judg-

ment, two pieces of testimony stand out. One is from a speech by SS Chief Heinrich Himmler before SS leaders in Poznan in 1943:

I want to tell you about a very grave matter in all frankness. We can talk about it quite openly here, but we must never talk about it publicly....I mean the evacuation of the Jews, the extermination of the Jewish people....Most of you will know what it means to see 100 corpses piled up, or 500 or 1,000. To have gone through this and—except for instances of human weakness—to have remained decent, that has made us tough. This is an unwritten, never to be written, glorious page of our history.⁶⁷

The other piece of evidence, from Hans Frank, Governor-General of occupied Poland, is worth noting because it is a judgment rendered not by the accusers, but by the accused. Referring to the annihilation of the Jews, he told the court: "A thousand years will pass and still this guilt of Germany shall not have been erased."⁶⁸ He was in a position to know: As the chief occupation officer of Poland, he had presided over the murder of 3 million men, women and children—the largest Jewish population in any country in Europe.

*That which has happened is a warning. To forget it is guilt. It must be continually remembered.
It was possible for this to happen, and it remains possible for it to happen again at any minute.
Only in knowledge can it be prevented.*

—Karl Jaspers⁶⁹

Why We Must Know

If, as Hans Frank acknowledged, the guilt for inventing, organizing and carrying out the Holocaust lies with Germany, it must also be acknowledged that the world permitted the Holocaust to happen. For the Nazis succeeded in murdering the Jews of Europe not only because of their fanatic commitment to the “Final Solution,” or because their advanced killing technology enabled them to do so; they succeeded because no nation in the civilized world intervened, heeded the threats that Jews were about to be slaughtered, or provided refuge from the slaughterers when the threats became reality. They succeeded, in short, because they were allowed to succeed. “The bystanders to cruelty,” concluded Arthur D. Morse, the chronicler of American apathy, “became bystanders to genocide.”⁷⁰

The Holocaust stands both as history and as a warning. As history, it shows us how easily attitudes and ideas are translated into moral action or lack of it, and how that translation determines whether human beings live or die. As the record shows, where the non-Jewish population opposed the Nazis’ racist ideology and offered help to the Jews, Jewish losses were relatively low; where anti-Semitism met a widespread sympathetic response, the destruction of the Jews was virtually total.

For years, the majority of people preferred not to know the details of the Holocaust; and in recent years, as interest in the subject has grown, there have even been—precisely as General

Eisenhower predicted—some clumsy efforts by old and new Nazis and self-styled historical theorists to deny that the crimes really happened.⁷¹

While mostly ignored, as they deserve to be, such efforts to rewrite history have, on some occasions, produced eloquent rejoinders—among them one, printed in *The New York Times* in December 1977, by the late Walter J. Fellenz, Colonel, U.S.A., who led the combat infantry troops that overran the Dachau concentration camp in Germany on April 29, 1945:

I was the first American camp commander of this death mill.... Now, 32½ years later, I am still shocked by what I saw during my 16 hours at the liberation of this shameful place. To me, the Holocaust was one of the most shameful crimes since man walked this earth. More shameful, however, is the fact that the forces of evil are trying to deny that this Holocaust ever took place.... What are the real motives of these people? Are they possessed by evil? Sadly, I truly think so.... No, I am not a Jew; I am but an old soldier....⁷²

That this witness to the Nazi crimes expected some people not to believe him if they thought he was Jewish suggests how prevalent still is the idea that the Holocaust is solely a Jewish matter. It is well, in the face of such belief, to recall the warning of the anti-Nazi German philosopher, Karl Jaspers, that what happened must be remembered because it can happen again at any minute. Implicit in this reminder is another: What happened to one people can happen to any.

The Holocaust was and remains a tragedy of universal implication, and one whose warnings we ignore at our peril.

Readings and Footnotes

The literature documenting and interpreting the Holocaust is so immense that it would take a large book just to list it. In 1973, one bibliography, limited to English-language materials (Jacob Robinson, *The Holocaust and After: Sources and Literature in English*, New York: YIVO Institute), listed over 6,000 items, and the flood of publications has not abated since then.

Listed immediately below is a limited selection of the best-known and most authoritative basic works readily available to American readers. The footnotes that follow these general references name many additional important works, in English and other languages.

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3. Wojciech Barcz, "Die erste Vergasung" (The First Gassing), in H. G. Adler

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4. Lord Elwyn-Jones (one of the prosecutors for the United Kingdom at the 1945-46 Nuremberg trial, subsequently Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain), letter dated May 19, 1977. Reproduced in Arthur Suzman and Denis Diamond, *Six Million Did Die: The Truth Shall Prevail* (Johannesburg: South African Board of Jewish Deputies, 1977), pp. 32f.
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